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**CHICAGO**—On the same day the State of Illinois honored American Revolutionary War hero General Casimir Pulaski, U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and U.S. Reps. Mike Quigley (D-Chicago) and Dan Lipinski (D-Western Springs) pledged today to spearhead bipartisan legislation to include Poland in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP).

“Despite its strong support for the United States, Poland remains one of the only major democratic U.S. allies to be excluded from the Visa Waiver Program,” Senator Kirk said. “The United States should stand by its commitment to this strong democratic ally and bring Poland into the Visa Waiver Program.”

“On my trip to Poland last year, I saw firsthand Poland’s commitment to democracy and importance as our ally,” said Congressman Quigley. “I’ve been working since the day I took office for Poland’s inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program because it’s essential for both our diplomacy and our national security.”

“My district is home to more than 100,000 people of Polish ancestry, and this issue is important to many of us, which is why I’ve been working to include Poland in the Visa Waiver Program for the past six years,” said Congressman Lipinski, the co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Poland. “Having contributed to the fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, Poland is one of our most reliable allies, and I strongly believe it should qualify for participation in the waiver program.”

Senator Kirk and Congressmen Quigley and Lipinski said they will introduce the Secure Travel and Counterterrorism Partnership Act in the Senate and House. The legislation aims to update and modernize VWP requirements, ultimately making Poland and other U.S. allies eligible to participate in VWP.

The Kirk/Quigley/Lipinski legislation would make the primary qualifying criteria for VWP participation a low overstay rate--set at less than 3 percent of foreign nationals who remain in the United States after their visa expires. Current practice uses the visa refusal rate, but experts agree that is an outdated measure that is less relevant to U.S. security, law enforcement, or contribution to rates of illegal immigration.

The bill also enhances national security by encouraging information sharing between the United States and member countries.

Poland currently is one of the few European nations to be excluded from the VWP, despite its nearly century-long diplomatic relationship with the United States. The Polish government repealed its visa requirement for U.S. citizens traveling to Poland in 1991.

In his December 2010 meeting with Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski, President Barack Obama said he would make Poland's admission into the VWP a "priority," and he pledged to complete that process expeditiously.

Currently, citizens of 36 foreign nations are eligible to participate in VWP, which allows foreign visitors to travel to the United States for up to 90 days without a visa.

Poland, a member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, also participates in the "Schengen Area," made up of 25 European nations that allow passport-free travel across borders.

Congressmen Lipinski and Quigley and Senator Kirk also pointed out that Poland has been one of the staunchest U.S. allies during its military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, where 2,500 Polish soldiers currently are deployed. At least 24 Polish troops have been killed in action.

No new nations have been added to the U.S. program since 2008, when Greece joined. The nations of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia and South Korea also are among the VWP's newest members.

The United States launched its visa waiver program in 1986 to make it easier for tourists and

business travelers from friendly nations to visit without a visa as long as their homeland met stringent security and law-enforcement standards.

The program's security standards include sharing security-related information with the United States and the timely reporting of lost or stolen passports. VWP participants also are required to maintain enhanced counterterrorism, law enforcement, border control, and document security standards.

Enhanced security procedures were added to the program under the Bill Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, including the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) that allows the Department of Homeland Security to determine, prior to travel, whether an individual eligible for the VWP poses a law enforcement or security risk to the United States.

A complete list of the 36 nations that currently participate in the VWP is available at [http://www.dhs.gov/files/programs/content\\_multi\\_image\\_0021.shtm#4](http://www.dhs.gov/files/programs/content_multi_image_0021.shtm#4)